

The Wheel of Yes



Poems and Essays of 1994 -1995

by Alan Harris

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Who is turning the wheel of yes?

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The Wheel of Yes

Round and round
the wheel of yes
(with a thank you at every turn)
turns.

Every no becomes
a speck of dust
clinging only to surfaces
and frightened by
the blessed tremendousness
of bountiful shadows
out of the unknown.

The wheel of yes brings babies
out of grandness onto planets,
sounds out of souls
into other souls,
joy out of gloom,
inspiration out of worry.

Who is turning
the wheel of yes?
Who is loving
amidst the dooms of fear?
Who is giving
more than there ever was?

Yes.

Yes.

Yes.

Welcoming Patrick Keith Harris

August 7, 1994

Where have you been now, oh Patrick me boy,
Before your grand entrance that brought so much joy?
Were you out in the starlight quite happy and free?
Had you any idea who your parents would be?

Were the comets your friends, Patrick Harris me boy?
Did you reach toward the moon thinking “What a nice toy?”
Wherever you’ve been, Patrick, welcome to Earth—
It’s a fairly nice place once you get past the birth.

You will have the best care you could ask for, me lad,
From Mika and Brian (you know, Mom and Dad),
Who will give you a bed, healthy food, and much love
In a home where you’ll heighten the blessings thereof.

Three things Grandma Linda and I wish for you:
May the heaven within you guide all that you do;
May the bumps on your path make you fearless and strong;
And may life for you, Patrick, be happy and long.

Grandpa Alan Harris, poet
Grandma Linda Harris, editor

Gifts That Stay

A Wedding Poem

How fortune made us meet
we cannot say,
but soon two pairs of feet
will walk the way.

We mirror each to each
the lessons needed
to learn what love may teach
if only heeded.

We give as best we can,
this wedding day,
a woman and a man
as gifts that stay.

Dudely May

Y'know, I'm into these lilac scents
And the birds that chirp and sing
Before the dawn in trees near the fence—
It's a totally awesome thing.

My vibes become, like, optimum
When the May air stirs my pad—
I'm clueless where that rush comes from
But it's totally, totally rad.

I groove with the falling of way cool rain,
And I dig (oh, wow!) the space
Of, like, thunderstorms (they fry my brain)
With subwoofer-quality bass.

Since the Dude laid down this happenin' season,
I'm thinkin' He must have meant it,
And if May should croak for any reason,
We'd have to, like, reinvent it.

City Spill

Chicago traffic this morning
roars and beeps
like a cheap video game.

Freakishly, at Wells and Adams,
a speeding bicyclist's paper sack
spills his stash of shiny bagels
all over Wells Street.

Heads turn.

Two dozen bagels kiss the street
at crazy angles,
then goofily twirl on empty centers
until gravity calms them down
in front of some cars at the light.

The bicyclist jerks his vehicle
over to the curb while hissing
inaudible words of concern.

Wells Street, now set like
a sudden breakfast table,
displays to the public
a tasty temptation
with not one taker.

Idling cars restrained
before the strewn bagels
by a red light
now turning green
begin to roll bagelward.

As if witnessing
a friend's execution,
the bicyclist clutches
his empty sack and
glares with grim indignity
at the squashings.

Honored Guest

Came on a thread,
you did,
to shine,
you do,
a warm beam,
you are,
from a sun
we all share.

Bless the thread
that brought us you,
and you that brought
the beam to share.

Natural,
you seem,
and fresh,
completely,
as rainwater
seeking grass,
or daffodil buds
blooming for April.

Like a stirring of air
through an open
window, you freshen
the whole house.



Haiku

Empty church: alone
I sit in sermonless awe
as steeple doves coo.

Lullaby

For a new grandchild

When Mom sings me a melody
And with a kiss turns down the light,
I drift off free and lazily
To join the mysteries of the night.

Across the sky soft clouds go by,
In each a face I've known by day.
They sing and sigh a lullaby
Which soothes, delights, and fades away.

In waves unknown I rock alone
As if my bed were a little boat
That sails a zone of undertone
And keeps me safe as I dream and float.

Now the clouds begin to wane and thin,
The last one showing my mother's face.
She strokes my chin and brings me in
From far adrift to her warm embrace.

Down, Down in the Tao

A Grand Unnameable
inaudibly speaks
from endless here,
else could speak we not
nor be.

Feathers, we,
on a deep bird
unseen between
two night skies,
flying because
feathers can.

Listening are we, with
our universe held to one ear,
to keeps-playing scuffles
between Isn't and Is, boisterous
in their muffled playroom.

To dance is the rule
in our This-That school
excepting that sleep
too is a rule
and quite more deep.

End of the world?
Peace after that?
Perhaps—but from within
the Night of All Nights
some eventually tickled
divine sleeper may
dreamingly laugh aloud,
stirring breathing into the mist—
and back soon will be we,
guns, and daily newspapers.

Call this if you wish
“The Little Laugh Theory”
although nameable is the Is
no more than is the Isn't,
down, down in the Tao.

To Sleep

Body and bed go soft.

Final thinking fades to formless vapor.

Mattering gives way to “all is well.”

Breathing forgets breathing.

Shapeless shadows welcome a friendly falling.

Wishes murmur up through moving images.

Dewdrop opens into endless ocean.

Time unknown . . .

Innerly free . . .

Floating . . .

Drifting . . .

Peace . . .

80-megaton alarm clock explodes.

Table Grace

We deeply offer our thanks
to the Deepest of Thankables
and our abiding love
to the Most Abiding of Lovables
as we gather here
in grace under grandness
humbly to eat of the earth
so that rippings of renewal
may nurture and empower our
sweetly imperative lives.

May the sustenance we now
receive within ourselves
enable us to give out
more than we possess
as our lungs and souls
breathe more than is air
on our chosen journey
into more than we know.

We honor the One within us
while dwelling within the One.
Amen.

Oaks Near Town

Black and green
under sunlight
stand these aged oaks,
seasoned wisdom in wood.

“Believe, believe!”
preaches the chapel bell
from a spire in town
to the congregated trees

which, distanced from doctrine,
stand firmly unnoticed
with their branches spread wider
and trunks planted deeper

and roots drinking more serenely
of a living water holier
than even believing can ever
believe belief capable of believing.

Clanging soon ends
and relinquishes
to the forest its
sacred silence.

Safe

I have floated like a maple leaf
to the sky below an autumn pond,
to an inner place of rich relief
from gusty winds now slipped beyond.

I sense eternal love from high
(or is it deep?) inside my being,
and find this view before my eye
requires a lighter, wider seeing.

Odd now, the fear those final sighs
would turn out all my lights within,
when light now brings these newer eyes
envisionings of friends and kin.

Since here I live within a force
that moves me anywhere I ask it,
let no one feel the least remorse
upon the closing of my casket.

Thoughtlets for a Quiet Mood

Our Origin

Either:

No one knows our origin, or

No one knows who knows our origin, or

People know people who know our origin and I'm not one of them.

Even so, perhaps the mystery of our origin has a solution that is in plain view.

Where Are We Going?

We are like electrons laughing and dancing in a wire. We never go far along the wire, but the magic we conjure up in the process, in the here and the now, may also closely resemble our destination. Electricity abounds in laughing and loving. Are we going, then, to where we are?

What Is Doubt?

Doubt is the snake squirming inside us when we feel superior to teachings we little understand that are merely poorly taught. Doubt justifies (or tries to) a chronic indolence within those who scorn the sacred as being decay and who shun advancement as being delay.

What Is Faith?

Faith is an enthusiastic arrow shot toward the open sky in hopes of hitting some target. Faith climbs and yearns. Faith is strong enough, some say, to move mountains. But when faith and ego intermix, there can be a mighty hollowness, a thundering emptiness. Purest faith quietly and simply serves the community.

Education

Education is the process of insisting upon your essence ever more gently. A seed's essence shoots a stalk up through dirt and manure—and matures. You are the seed and stalk. The school system is the dirt. The curriculum is the manure, because of which and in spite of which you blossom.

Hiding

The eyes are the windows of the soul, and the mouth's expression is the window of the heart. Children know a fake smile because it fails to match the eyes. They use the voice as a reliable stethoscope. Gestures, too, are a wind-vane revealing the direction of the soul's breath. Eyes, mouth, voice, gestures: these instruments of discovery, plus time, reveal all hiding.

A Mess

Order unperceived is called a mess. A mountain range is then a mess of piled rock, trees, and snow. A rain forest is a mess of flora and fauna. An artist's home may be a mess of paint, canvases, and brushes. Who sees messes? The one who judges. And who judges? The one who is blind to order under disorder.

Seeking

Seek, and you shall find another thing to seek, until you find a grave. Can you drop your seeking? If you can, your seeking may in turn release you. You may then find yourself to be anchored rather than self-yanked by a leash along some self-serving path. You may safely drop all, for nothing truly needful can fall away. A light load, no seeking, no path—will roses then fail to bloom?

Isms

Isms organize great thinking into neat mausoleums, each ism occupying its cataloged row and column, sealed off from change and living. Visit a mausoleum, and you may discover that any original ideas you hear are coming from your own soul, which is not dead, nor will it ever be. Never box me up or seal me up with an ism. Being always alive, I may need to whoop or sing. Let me breathe the breeze until I am the breeze.

Middle

Everywhere we go, we are in the exact middle of all thought, all doing. Others whom we think of as far away are also in that middle. We are billions of middles, all apparently separate yet somehow all concentric—all sharing one middle. Eccentricities continually appear and prevent stagnation, but they, too, share the middle. Seen from a dynamic middle, all may be well.

Purity

A religious costume is more likely to cloak impurity than to reveal purity. Purity is more a dancing than an achievement, and it dances through every heart in unique rhythm. Purity washes the soul with tears whenever there is a breakthrough. We have seen purity manifest in strong men, in hard women, in awful children. We have known purity by the generous act, the comforting smile, the glistening eye.

Listening

To listen deeply is to give deeply. Words decorate the rise and fall of more than our voice. Words are the throbs of our heart of hearts. Take bread and wine as you wish, but honor the communion of the moment—at school, at work, and in the family circle. Hear the hearing of others as well as their speaking. Meet in receptivity.

Unfamiliar

If we observe and honor the unfamiliar feelings that haunt and hurt us, these feelings will be found the growing ground into which we have already been planted. Following the unfamiliar through the tangled thickets of the familiar may lead to a blooming. Yes, there may be awful aching, fear, and upheavals—but one day comes the sweet grace of the blooming.

Days

At the end of a day, is there one less day in your life or one more day in your life? Is your life a stack of days, like a deck of cards? Or is it a stream in which waking and dreaming ripple on a surface above

unfathomed depths? “Are we digital or analog?” we might ask. “Particles or waves?” The particle folks bottle the water and sell it, while the wave folks flow in it toward the sea. Lungs and longings whisper “waves” to my own ears.

When All Goes Well

When all is going well, going badly is not far away. When all seems lost, well-being hovers nearby like the breath of an angel. Exulting will be humbled; despairing will be consoled. Lucky is the one who has no waves like these to ride—or is he?

Spirit and World

While the Spirit fills our souls with endless hints and nuances, the World carries the World home to the World in little shopping bags. Spirit or World—which is ruling? They may appear to alternate in supremacy, but if you have ever felt the intensity of being worldly, you may agree that Spirit has no rival at all except for lesser Spirit.

Alone?

I ask Above for guidance, and I remain who I am. Was there guidance? I ask who I am, and I remain who I am. I ask why I am here, and here I am, asking. I ask where my ancestors have gone, and silence reveals only their memories and legends. Answers fail. But now a neighborhood child rings the doorbell and asks to talk. We two answer for each other.



Echoes of Earlville

When someone first revealed to me that I lived in Earlville, Illinois, I had no inkling there was ever any other place to live. Show me another town where trains would wail from creek to crossover, glissando-ing like slide trombones.

I remember winter nights in bed when long steam-engine whistle toots would bring about deep slumbering—reliable as lullabies. Soon progress dared to usher in the brassy, strident dissonance of diesel horns, “long-long-short-long,” which set the window panes a-buzz.



Percussion also spread through town from near the Farmer’s Elevator—during harvest rush, staccato pops from John Deeres lined up near the scales sent complex polyrhythms further east than the Legion Hall.

Earlville was small, so most knew most—for everybody’s good, it seemed. Few homes were listed, bought, or sold without a buzz of estimates proceeding through the telephones. Transgression stories relayed at the noisy downtown coffee shop made patrons want just one more cup—and filled the owner’s till enough to pay the waitress and the cook.

In Earlville, peaceful though it was, occasional embarrassments were held quite close to home and hearth. Shrewd townsfolk having secrets knew the power that perfect silence has, so that even at the coffee shop no mortal ever was the wiser.

I wonder whether Earlville now is still the way it used to be. Are the same things happening today except to different residents? Do trains still pound those west-end switches, filling town with jazzy rhythms? Do policemen cruise the streets at night and watch for tavern stragglers who think booze helps their driving skills?

The Leader prints the deaths of friends I used to work and joke beside, their laughter now a memory. Obituaries fail to tell the grief and joy these townsfolk knew. If Roman Catholic, they find eternal rest on holy ground off Union Street just east of town. For Protestants and “faith unknown” the Precinct is the plot of choice, out by the blacktop south of town. I’ll join my townsmen there someday when hidden forces that I trust decide it’s time I go back home.

Although I can’t be sure I’ll hear those trains at night from where I rest, the living folks will surely hear them on and off between their dreams. As each nocturnal freight train bawls through town, then fades out west or east, light-sleeping heirs to Earlville’s past will pull their covers up a bit, turn over, and go back to sleep.

The Time I Was Late

December snow covered the ground, and many sidewalks were not yet shoveled. And I was late—I was going to be late for school. The earth might implode like a broken light bulb or explode like a cherry bomb, but I still had to be on time to school. I had never been late.

My report card for my first year of exposure to institutional learning was monotonously filled with A's in the rows for the subjects and 0's in the rows for days absent and 0's in the rows for times tardy and checks in all the rows for good department. My parents never said much about these great accomplishments, but I knew they were secretly proud of me by the way they never scolded me about school. They always got a sort of funny smile on their faces when I would bring home my report card, the kind of smile that is pretty flat and a little turned down at the ends. Then they would say, "Well, that's pretty good. Do you like Miss Larson?" And I would say "Yah." Then they would sign the report card and put it back into its brown envelope and give it back to me saying, "Now don't lose it." And that was like telling me not to lose my right foot.

Grandpa Green had told me when I started to school that he would give me a nickel for every A I got on my report card. So every six weeks I would write him a letter telling him about all the A's I got. An A in reading, an A in arithmetic, an A in spelling, an A in writing, an A in whatever other subjects I was taking, or were taking me. Nine A's, I told him one time at his house. He said, "Let's see, how much do I owe you then?" "I don't know." "Well, a nickel is 5 cents, isn't it?" "Yah." "Well, then, how much is 9 times 5?" "I don't know." "That comes to 45 cents, doesn't it?" "I guess." Then he would dole out the 45 cents or whatever the amount happened to be for that six weeks and like a good thrifty boy I would put it in my little silver metal bank that locked up with a key and I didn't have the key.

But I was going to be late for school. It was cold out and the big hand on the kitchen clock was getting down close to 4 and I had to be at school by the time it got to 6 and Mom was helping me put on my jacket and boots and hat with built-in earflaps and leggings and mittens and I was watching the clock and saying hurry up and I was finally ready to go but just before I got to the door Mom asked me if I had a hanky and I said no and she said wait a minute you've got to take a hanky and she ran upstairs to get one and I sort of had to go to the bathroom and the big hand kept on moving and I had never been home this late before and I stood there holding my lunch pail waiting by the door and finally she came down and helped me put the hanky in my jeans pocket underneath my leggings and then she kissed me good-bye and I ran out the door and kept running down our long street that ended at Mrs. Richards' house and my boots were heavy and I couldn't keep running like that so I walked awhile and then I ran some more and I was running past Charles Johnson's house and I got to the tracks and looked both ways and ran across them even though I was never supposed to run across the tracks because I might fall down and get hit by a zephyr because somebody else had done that once and I was still trying to run but I could hardly even walk and on my Mickey Mouse watch that Grandpa Green had bought me one time at the drug store the hand was down to 5 and I was only as far as the Ford garage and then I heard the first bell ringing at school and I never before realized you could hear the first bell at school from that far away and I started to kind of cry and I was puffing and running and my boots were too heavy and I was kicking snow as I ran and walked and ran again and I started down the last street that led to the school but it was the longest one and I couldn't run any more but I had to so I ran some more and the hand was almost down to 6 when I finally got to the big playground and it was empty and I had never seen it empty before and I stumbled up the steps and when I was in the cloak-room tearing off my coat and boots and hat and mittens and leggings the second bell started ringing and everyone was supposed to be in his seat facing forward with his hands folded on his desk and not talking when the second bell rang and I walked into the room just as the bell stopped ringing saying hopefully to Miss Larson that I was almost late wasn't I and I collapsed into my seat and was sick all morning.

The Scrooge before Christmas

Yes, there is a Scrooge. He haunts the hearts of those who wish that Santa's \$10.00 white beard were real—who wish that his “Ho, ho, ho” meant more than the \$6.00 an hour he is paid to utter it. Scrooge-inhabited people desperately long for a “Ho, ho, ho” from deep within a genuine person's heart.

We seem to want people, all people, to be genuine, yet most people have personality owies that deflect them away from thoroughly genuine behavior. Christmas would ideally be a time when all of those owies would get better, but through some quirk of human nature, they usually get worse. The showy get showier, the stingy get stingier, the drinking get drunker, the overeating get overweight, and the busy get busier.

Considering the above, “Christmas” would seem a mockery when we consider that two-thirds of the word is “Christ”. Perhaps those of Scroogish persuasion would prefer to spell it “Christmess”.

Scroogish people are not the only ones who clamor for change. Certain religious types are annually haranguing each other about the True Meaning of Christmas. These frustrated (and sometimes ultra-holy) people don't usually identify at all with Scrooge, but they, too, hate the tinsel, the tawdriness, and (other people's) hypocrisy. They want everyone to concentrate on the Christ child, the angels, the star, and other symbols which provided comfortable myths and icons to live by during their childhood. They tend to cling to these warm, fuzzy concepts the more tightly as they find themselves struggling with the bottomless mysteries of relationships, emotions, illnesses, and the Big Unmentionable. These bewildered adults cry out for something more stable, something safer, something holier, and something that makes sense when life doesn't.

Scroogeness could be defined as a thin layer of rage masking a desperate search for sincerity beneath. The Scrooge in our hearts knows the difference between the Jesus and the junk. Scrooge is the skeptic who dares to call tinsel tinsel, the seemingly cruel man who eschews sentimentality. Scrooge dares to drill down deeper than the reindeer manure, down into his past hurts and heartaches, down to the deepest gnarled roots that tap into his tortured soul. No, he does not like Christmas, nor does he especially like himself, but in digging deeply, he discovers a little child in there who can scarcely breathe. He sees that the “Bah” in “Bah, humbug” has all along been a crying out for breath and life and truth and goodness. Humbug has been smothering this little child for most of its life.

Long live the Scrooge within us, for deep within this Scrooge is the holy child who began life in a stable full of smelly stuff, and in whose innocent heart shimmers a true light which will dissolve the false lights and shams.

The Christ, then, may be said to inhabit Scrooge and you and me. Even though our whole land be filled with tinsel, Scrooge and you and I may discover that tinsel is an improvement over the smelly stuff in the stable. Through this child's eyes we may even see a light which we might call, for lack of a better word, a star.

Questions for Making a Decision

1. What is my primary motive as I make this decision?
2. Will my decision cause benefits beyond myself and promote a wider good?
3. Will my course of action unnecessarily diminish or hurt any person or group?
4. Will the consequences of my decision be long-term or temporary?
5. Will I be turning over control of my life to another person or agency?
6. Will I be able to have the necessities of life?
7. What sacrifices will I need to make, and what benefits outweigh these sacrifices?
8. Whose strong influence am I feeling upon my decision, and shall I allow that?
9. What is the worst result my decision can bring, and can I accept that?
10. What safety net will I have if nothing goes as planned?
11. Will high risk be offset by potential growth and deepening?
12. When am I going to stop thinking about this decision and do something?



About Alan Harris

When Alan Harris was born on Sunday, June 20, 1943, his father, Keith E. Harris, was piloting a B-17 in bombing missions over Europe while his mother (Margie) worried about Keith lovingly from Illinois.

Schooling in Earlville, Illinois (Alan's home town) was interesting, useful, and generally free of creativity (do what the teacher says, get the good grade). From 5th through 12th grades he played the trumpet in the school band and enjoyed the contest trips. His father drove a school bus as part of his living (farming was the other part), and if Alan happened to ride on his father's bus, he had to very much behave.

Illinois State University was where Alan became chagrined over how a student with a full class load could possibly keep up with all of the assignments given in said classes.

He felt he was a pawn in a game, but with judicious time-shuffling and corner-cutting he plowed along and made respectable grades amidst all the worries.

A bright spot at ISU was taking a contemporary American poetry class with Dr. Ferman Bishop. Through him Alan discovered depths in poetry that he had never dreamed of while in high school. E. E. Cummings took him for zingy flights of in-your-faceness. T. S. Eliot, whose symbols even had symbols, fully baffled him. Robert Frost was slyly charming. Emily Dickinson's mastery of rhyme and meter for conveying soul and spirit made the young poet's heart go funny. Alan started "being a poet" in his sophomore year (1962) at ISU. Poetry had been previously unneeded in his life but now was available to contain parts of his soul that he hadn't realized were there.

After graduating from ISU in 1966 there was the little matter of having to earn a living, which took the form of two years of high school English teaching, three years of tuning and repairing pianos, and (after a 1976 MS in Computer Science at Northern Illinois University) about 25 years of computer work (mainly programming, in-house computer teaching, and Web development—for Commonwealth Edison Company in Chicago).

During most of that vocational stint before retirement, Alan continued to write poems. Even with the whirl of commuting it was still possible to emote at home. He launched his current Web site (www.alharris.com) in 1995 with a few poems, and eventually has populated it with almost everything he has written. As a poet, essayist, story-writer, and photographer he has spurned the print publication route, having seen the excruciations gone through by other writers trying to make a big name and big money for themselves via magazine and book publishers. With the Web, there's instant publication, moneyless communication, and a worldwide potential audience. Of course, the literature has to stand on its own feet to get readers, but it's always there for those who seek it, or just happen in, or get sent in.

Alan met his wife Linda at ISU in 1962 and they were married in 1966. Linda has worked as a school speech therapist, insurance medical office worker, and medical transcriptionist, in addition to being a conscientious wife, mother, and grandmother. They have a son, Brian, who is a Tucson percussionist.

